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Building Commodity: Consumption/ Production of a Nineteenth Century Ottoman/British “Iron House for a Corn-Mill”

Sevil Enginsoy Ekinci

1 The biography of Sir William Fairbairn, a well-known nineteenth-century British engineer, written partly by himself, completed and edited by William Pole, and published in 1877, covers a whole chapter on Fairbairn’s “Journey to Constantinople and Work for the Turkish Government.”[1] It opens with a brief introduction, explaining that in 1838 the Ottoman sultan Mahmut II sent a commission to Britain to make inquiries about certain technical improvements, which he planned to carry out in some establishments of the Ottoman state. After giving the information that as part of their inspection duty, the commissioners visited Fairbairn’s works in Manchester and London, the chapter develops through Fairbairn’s own words, telling the rest of the story. So, a few months after this visit, Fairbairn received, through the Ottoman ambassador in London, an invitation from Mahmut II to survey and report upon various government manufactories then in operation in Istanbul. About to decline the invitation because of his numerous engagements in London and Manchester, a second invitation convinced him to undertake the job. In 1839, he arrived at Istanbul together with his eldest son, and a few days after their arrival the sultan died. However, Fairbairn’s job was not canceled and he received orders from the “Grand Vizier” to proceed with his surveys and reports. So, “[i]n the course of five or six weeks,” Fairbairn says: “I had inspected and reported on all the government works, and recommended what I considered essential to their efficiency and improvement.”[2] Among those establishments he cites “the imperial dockyards, small-arms manufactory, cannon foundries, powder mills and roperies,”[3] and then recounts briefly his technical observations about them. But Fairbairn’s job for the Ottoman state was not limited to those inspections and reporting. Concluding his travel notes, Fairbairn says: “The visit to Constantinople was an important event for me, as it eventually led to

large orders which I executed for the government after my return."[4] So, in addition to "furnaces, forges, and rolling mills," he sent out "a large woolen mill and machinery for the manufacture of clothing for the army . . . silk and cotton model mills, [and] a corn-mill, an iron house, for Serasker Halil Pasha."[5]

2 Aside from Fairbairn's travel notes, the chapter presents some further account of his work for the Ottoman state in the form of extracts from a paper which he presented at a meeting of the Institution of Civil Engineers in 1843. Remarkably, it is his "iron house for a corn-mill" that holds a central position in this account, as it starts explaining:

3 [Since] [a]lmost all the houses, and many of the public buildings, in Turkey, [were] constructed of timber, destructive fires were frequent. In many parts of the country the common building materials were expensive; iron had therefore been resorted to for construction. And Mr. Fairbairn had already sent over an iron house for a corn-mill, 50 feet long, 25 feet wide, of three stories in height, and with an iron roof. It was finished in 1840, and erected at Constantinople in the following year.[6]

4 Furthermore, it was "[t]he success of this attempt," as the account continues to explain, "[that] induced a second order, which was for an extensive woolen factory, [i.e., the one for the army, as mentioned by Fairbairn in his travel notes] to be composed entirely of cast iron plates, the interior being formed throughout of brick arches, upon cast iron columns and bearers, with an iron roof."[7]

5 The important place of this "iron house for a corn-mill" in Fairbairn's career is also evident in the chapter devoted to corn-mills in the second volume of his *Treatise on Mills and Mill-Work*, published in 1863.[8] Here, it is one of the two examples that Fairbairn chooses to illustrate the technological improvements in this field. His discussion firstly gives the information that it was constructed in Istanbul, for Serasker Halil Pasha, in 1842, and "under conditions that [it] should be entirely of iron, that it might not be burnt to the ground by the fires which so frequently occur in the Turkish capital."[9] Then, the discussion goes into technical details, and it is actually the most technical one, among his other writings related with the building,[10] and it is about not only the building itself, but also the machinery that it "houses." But what makes this chapter particularly important is that Fairbairn combines this discussion with the drawings of the building, and more specifically, with two plans and two sections.[11] Except for a partial masonry wall, "affording a foundation for the bearings of the heavier gearing of the mill,"[12] the building, as those drawings illustrate, was a completely iron structure: it was enclosed by walls of iron plates, supported by cast-iron columns and cast-iron beams, and covered by an arched roof of corrugated iron plates.

6 As a final note on the importance that Fairbairn attributed to this corn-mill, what can also be added here is that he referred to the building as "the first iron house built in [Britain]" in his "Lecture on the Progress of Engineering," which he delivered twenty years after its manufacture.[13]

7 To place these descriptions of the "iron house" within the context of Fairbairn's journey to Istanbul, I would like to review his travel notes once again by focusing on his technical observations about the existing Ottoman establishments. As he explains, although "[s]ome additions and new machinery had been introduced a year or two before [his] arrival, they were far from perfect."[14] For him, the main reason for that "primitive state" of those establishments was "the apathy of the Turks and their aversion to new things," as in the case of the small-arms manufactory.[15] Regarding the

cannon foundries, meanwhile, the main problem was that they were "in the same state as when they were erected two centuries ago."[16] Furthermore, they were also "an example of the dilatory manner in which the works were conducted."[17] Here, Fairbairn refers to a specific event of casting a large gun which he attended. As he tells, when he arrived at the cannon-foundries:

8 I found [the superintendent] seated on an ottoman with his attendants, in the full enjoyment of his coffee and pipe . . . he took out a Turkish almanack, and unfolded it from a small bobbin, which he carefully consulted. After pondering some time, he at last said that [the casting] could not be done, as the appointed day was unlucky . . . Although all was then ready, it had to wait till some more fortunate day in the following week.[18]

9 At this point, I would like to articulate, as Fairbairn himself does, his technical observations with those, other than technical, such as the ones derived from his "several excursions into the country which surrounds the Ottoman capital,"[19] his explorations within the city itself, and also his "witnessing . . . of the Turkish habits and customs."[20]

10 Regarding the "excursions," which he "had to perform on horseback . . . as there were no roads excepting tracks for camels and horses," it seems that what struck him in particular was "the immense area of good land lying waste in almost every direction in which [he] travelled."[21] Meanwhile, "Constantinople proper, or Stamboul," for him, displays a characteristic, common in "all other Oriental cities," and that is being "divided into sections, where the different trades are carried on."[22] More specifically, he seems to be interested in "covered markets" in terms not only of their physical qualities, but also of the opportunity that they provided him to observe the way the traders conducted their business, and did their "work of manufacture," or briefly, "the habits and customs of the Turks."[23]

11 Furthermore, it seems that a dinner party to which Fairbairn was invited by Serasker Halil Pasha was a particularly important occasion for him to observe "the Turkish habits and customs." As he recounts in detail:

12 There was a party of twelve at dinner, composed of officers and effendis, connected with the war and ordnance departments . . . every person at the table, which was very low, had two servants in attendance; one with a glass goblet of clear water, and the other with a napkin. These were in requisition after every course; and the repast, after a tureen or goblet of sherbet, wound up with pipes and coffee.[24]

13 On the basis of this review of Fairbairn's travel notes, it is possible to argue that what characterizes his technical observations is basically the contrast between the "advanced" British technology and the "primitive" Ottoman technology that he describes in relation to "rational" versus "irrational" approach to technology, and "willingness" versus "unwillingness" to adopt technological developments. When such a contrast is considered together with his depiction of Istanbul as a city with its uncultivated nature, covered markets, and people having the habits of drinking sherbet and coffee, and of smoking pipes, it is also possible to reach the conclusion that Fairbairn's travel notes are typical Orientalist representations of the binary and hierarchal construct of "West" versus "East."

14 But to reach this conclusion means to look at the whole narrative of the chapter from a limited viewpoint; since, it means at the same time to assume that the only active agent

in this story, in the sense of the traveling, exploring, and observing subject,[25] is Fairbairn. However, the remaining parts of Fairbairn's own notes, and also of the related chapter in his biography actually unsettle these observations, and accordingly, any attempt to frame the ambivalence of the whole narrative in terms of "West" versus "East". So, what I would like to emphasize is that in this narrative it was not only Fairbairn who traveled, explored, and observed, but also the Ottomans. And actually, it was the Ottomans whose visit to London and Manchester, and whose technical investigation in these cities initiated Fairbairn's visit to Istanbul and his own technical investigation there. Furthermore, as explained in the chapter after Fairbairn's notes, the Ottomans visited him in London two more times, in 1843 to offer him some additional work for the Ottoman state,[26] and in 1847, to give him sultan Abdülmecid's "decoration set in diamonds along with a *Ferman* . . . as a reward for [his] old services to [the sultan]."[27]

15 Accordingly, what I would suggest is that those cross- and trans-geographical movements paved the way for "the iron house for a corn-mill" which itself repeated that mode of movement, in the sense that as an almost completely prefabricated structure, it was manufactured at Fairbairn's workshop in London, and probably assembled first there to be exhibited to the public,[28] and then, disassembled and shipped to Istanbul, and reassembled there.

16 In line with this point, I would argue that this mobility of the "iron house" was an issue related not only to the transformation of architectural production, but to the transformation of architectural consumption as well. Here, it was still the patron, Serasker Halil Pasha, who, as the minister of war, represented the Ottoman state, and had the power to initiate the building activity; and what he did was to order a building, or in other words, to buy a commodity. In this sense, the production of the building as an industrial object was intertwined with its consumption as a commodity.[29]

17 Furthermore, considering this mobility of the "iron house" across geographical boundaries, it becomes clear that the site where it was actually located cannot be explained in terms of the place where it was both produced and constructed or consumed; simply because of the fact that such a place did not exist. So, I would suggest that the site where the building was located corresponded to the intertwined relationship between its production and consumption that revealed the cross- and/or trans-geographical movements of those British and Ottoman actors within the historicity of the economic and political encounters between the British and Ottoman Empires in the nineteenth century.[30] Then, what I would like to emphasize, here, is the necessity of writing a decentered history of the building as an alternative to the one which attributes primary importance to its production, and accordingly, which privileges, implicitly or explicitly, its "Western" context by perpetuating the binary and hierarchal construct of "West" versus "East."

18 So, this paper is an attempt to formulate a frame for writing such a history by forming part of an ongoing comprehensive research project[31] which seeks to reach the other possible voices, narrating their own versions of the story of this "iron house for a corn-mill," and more specifically, its almost completely unheard story in Istanbul, in terms of exactly where it was constructed and when, why, and how it ceased to exist.[32]

NOTES DE FIN

1. William POLE, ed., *The Life of Sir William Fairbairn*, London, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1877, pp. 165–176.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 172.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 173–174.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
8. William FAIRBAIRN, *Treatise on Mills and Millwork, Part II*, London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1863, pp.117–126.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
10. *Institution of Civil Engineers, Minutes of Proceedings*, 1842–1843, vol. II, pp. 125–26; and "Woolen Factory for Turkey," *Journal of the Franklin Institute*, 1843, vol. VI, pp. 311–12;
11. FAIRBAIRN, *Treatise on Mills and Millwork,* pp. 119–122.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 121.
13. *Useful Information for Engineers*, 2nd series, 1860, p. 225 (cited in Samuel Smiles, *Industrial Biography: Iron-Workers and Tool-Makers*, London, J. Murray, 1876, p. 330).
14. POLE, *The Life of Sir William Fairbairn*, 168.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 168–169.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 171–172.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 170–171.
25. I adopt this theoretical point from Belgin Turan OZKAYA, "Theaters of Fear and Delight: Ottomans in the Serenissima," in Inge E. Boer, ed., *After Orientalism: Critical Entanglements, Productive Looks*, Amsterdam and London, 2004, p. 46.
26. Pole, *The Life of Sir William Fairbairn*, p. 172.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
28. Turpin C. Bannister, "Bogardus Revisited. Part I: The Iron Fronts," *JSAH*, vol. 15, no. 4, 1956, p. 15.
29. In general terms, the existing related literature on the nineneteenth-century Western and Ottoman architecture attributes primary importance to the production of the building by implying that its consumption was a subordinate activity.
30. For a discussion of the economic and political encounters between the British and Ottoman Empires specifically around the time of Fairbairn's visit to Istanbul, see Roderic H. DAVISON, "Britain, the International Spectrum, and the Eastern Question, 1827–1841," *New Perspectives on Turkey*, no.7, 1992, pp. 15–35.

31. For an earlier stage of my research on the building, see A. Sevil ENGINSOY, *Use of Iron as a New Building Material in Nineteenth Century Western and Ottoman Architecture*, MA Thesis, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, 1990, pp. 97–100, 107–115.
32. The Ottoman Industrial Statistics of 1913–1915 records a mill in Unkapani, Istanbul by giving the information that it belonged to the ministry of war and that it was at least fifty years old when this statistical report was prepared (Gunduz OKCUN, ed., *Osmanli Sanayii: 1913, 1915 Yillari Sanayi Istatistiki*, Ankara, 1970, p. 37). On the basis of this information, Afife Batur and Selcuk Batur point out that this mill may have been the "iron house for corn-mill" ("Istanbul'da 19. Yuzyil Sanayi Yapılarından Fabrika-i Humayunlar," *I. Uluslararasi Turk-Islam Bilim ve Teknoloji Tarihi Kongresi Bildirileri (14-18 Eylül 1981)*, vol. III, Istanbul, 1981, p. 334). But since that report does not provide any direct information to connect the Unkapani mill to the "iron house," it is still necessary to conduct further study to support the Baturs' assumption.

RÉSUMÉS

This paper traces the story of an "iron house for a corn-mill," as narrated by its manufacturer Sir William Fairbairn, a well-known nineteenth-century British engineer. Upon the order that Fairbairn had received from Serasker Halil Pasha, the Ottoman minister of war, during his visit to Istanbul in 1839, the building was produced at Fairbairn's workshop in Millwall, London in 1840, and exhibited to the public there, before it was shipped to and constructed in Istanbul in 1841. Forming part of a comprehensive study that aims to articulate this story with some others that can provide further information on the "iron house," including where it was located in the Ottoman capital, and when, why and how it ceased to exist, this paper emphasizes the intertwined relationship between the production of the building as an industrial object and its consumption as a commodity. Accordingly, it is an attempt to write a decentered history of the building by problematizing its site-specificity.

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Index chronologique : XX^{e} siècle, époque contemporaine, XIX^{e} siècle
Index géographique : Europe, Turquie, Istanbul, Londres, Manchester, Royaume-Uni
Mots-clés : génie civil, fer, récit, voyage

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